

**2014 Periodic Review Report  
Section on Student Assessment  
Committee on Assessment 2013-2014  
Final Version, Submitted 25 April 2014**

We have made a concerted effort to follow the recommendation the 2009 MSCHE Report that we make progress on Standard 14: Assessment of Student Learning, and Standard 7, “Institutional Effectiveness,” with a particular “focus on the use of assessment data to improve teaching and learning.” The Vassar College Mission Statement (revised May 2012) reads (in part):

The College makes possible an education that promotes analytical, informed, and independent thinking and sound judgment; encourages articulate expression; and nurtures intellectual curiosity, creativity, respectful debate and engaged citizenship.

We shall discuss our progress and plans to better achieve this mission under five headings: Assessment Committee Structure, Statistical Data on Student Outcomes and Attitudes, Assessment of Student Quantitative Skills, Assessment of Student Writing, and Assessment of Student Foreign Language Proficiency.

**Part I: Assessment Committee Structure**

According to Vassar’s Governance, the fundamental responsibility of the Assessment Committee is to “examine and evaluate the practices in place to achieve the college’s educational goals as stated in its mission statement and elsewhere.” However, the membership structure of the committee has proven to be an impediment. Specifically, members were originally elected to the committee for one-year terms. The rationale behind one-year terms was that it would give more faculty exposure to and input into issues of assessment. The actual result has been that the committee has limited institutional memory, and each year every committee member must climb a steep learning curve before he or she can even begin to do constructive work. As a result, Vassar has now amended the Governance language so that Assessment Committee terms are for two years, with a Chair for the committee elected separately. (The Chair election will occur first, so anyone who failed to be elected as Chair could still run to serve as a regular committee member.) The possibility of three-year terms was considered, but it was felt that, due to leaves and other college responsibilities, most faculty would be unwilling or unable to serve three-year terms.

A further improvement in the workings of the Assessment Committee is that the annual reports are now posted online on a website dedicated to the committee (and linked to from Vassar’s main committees page).<sup>1</sup> This will make sure that the reports are reliably archived and easily accessible.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://pages.vassar.edu/assessmentcomm/>

Although the Assessment Committee has already done a considerable amount of high-quality work for the college, we strongly believe that these changes will significantly improve the functioning of the committee.

These changes have now been implemented, but the 2012 Assessment Committee made two further recommendations related to the institutional responsibility for assessment:

1. Devise a centralized knowledge base of the educational assessment initiatives being undertaken around campus. The 2012 Assessment Committee judged that it is difficult to manage the charge of overseeing the assessment efforts on campus without this.
2. Provide institutional support in the form of somebody who has knowledge of modern assessment structures and who knows what assessment initiatives are going on around campus. Perhaps this could be part of the job description of the director of the LTRC (Learning and Teaching Resource Center).

We recommend that next year's Assessment Committee consider discussing these possibilities.

## **Part II: Statistical Data on Student Outcomes and Attitudes**

Vassar has participated in the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education (the WNS) in order to see what inferences could be drawn from that study about Vassar students' academic achievement and motivation that would help in the assessment of our educational process that was mandated by the Middle States Committee at the time of the College's re-accreditation in 2009, and which we need to undertake in any event in order to evaluate the success of the College in meeting its stated mission of promoting "analytical, informed, and independent thinking and sound judgment." The WNS included four components:

1. The Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP)
2. The Defining Issues Test (DIT-2)
3. The Academic Motivation Index (AMI)
4. The Good Practices Measure (GP)

The WNS was administered to students in the Class of 2011 during their freshman orientation in Fall 2007 and again at end of their senior year. About half of our participating Vassar students were given the CAAP (Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency) and the other half were given the DIT-2 (Defining Issues Test). The freshmen class consisting of 677 students was assembled to answer the questionnaires, but during the test a student asked whether doing so was required. When informed that participation was voluntary, some students left, so only 479 students completed the Wabash questionnaires as entering students. At many other schools, students were re-examined at the end of their freshman year. At Vassar this failed because only a handful of students (13) were willing to participate. As a result, our only two data sets are from students who were, in a sense, "pre-freshman" (i.e., they had not yet taken any Vassar

classes) and seniors. As we shall note below, this fact may be significant in interpreting the data.

Vassar re-administered the Wabash surveys to seniors in the Spring of 2011 at which time 390 students completed the exercise. In order to get this number, Vassar provided approximately \$20,000 in a group subsidy (based on number of students participating) for Senior Week activities. The following findings are based upon the 283 students who participated both upon entering Vassar and at the end of the four years. The level (and motivation) of student participation raises the issue of sample bias. As a result, we analyzed both personal and academic characteristics of the subsample of students in the WNS sample vs. the Class of 2011 as a whole and found no significant differences with respect to socio-economic status, ethnicity, gender, academic achievement (GPA at time of graduation), SAT/ACT scores, or division of the curriculum in which students had majored. There remains, of course, the possibility of some sample bias based on unmeasured attitudinal characteristics of “the WNS cohort”; however, such possibilities can never be eliminated, so we decided to proceed with the analysis of the data for this group.

### CAAP

We began by looking at statistical data consisting of simple (two-way) correlations between personal characteristics of the Vassar sample and changes in CAAP scores between freshman and senior years, as well as correlations between initial standings in freshman year and changes over time. We focused on a few personal characteristics such as senior year GPA, Race/Ethnicity, Gender, Division of Major, and comparison between initial CAAP score and change in score from freshman to senior year. Because of limitations imposed by sample size, additional variables of interest, such as U.S. citizen or resident/international student status, were omitted from our study. Extensive analysis found no observable systematic relationships between personal characteristics of the students (not demographic, socio-economic, or academic) and their changes in scores on the CAAP between entering freshmen and end of the senior year tests. There were overall only very slight improvements in average CAAP score. Further, individual student gains and losses were also typically small, and importantly, the improvements in score were greater for, and largely limited to, those who scored lower on the initial freshman test. Thus it appears that there is a ceiling effect in Vassar’s CAAP scores (very high to begin with, also high at the end), which reduced the changes in CAAP results for Vassar’s Wabash study to a simple “reversion to the mean.” This would be what one would expect if the CAAP test is more a measure of aptitude than of the kind of achievement that would be likely to change as a result of more years of education. It is likely the result of the CAAP test itself being nationally normed, and Vassar’s students being well above national norms in reasoning skills.

However, using the average scores in the Wabash study as a whole, we noted less improvement at Vassar than in the overall averages for all participating schools, but again much higher initial scores at Vassar. This was not surprising. As the scoring involves a “ceiling,” there is less room for improvement when initial scores are in the higher part of the distribution. We also looked at the results of a multivariate analysis of the data.

In multi-variate analyses of the CAAP score data, there were no significant regression coefficients (partial effects of any of the explanatory variables) nor were any of the  $R^2$ s of reasonable magnitude. In other words, moving from the simple correlations to more elaborate multiple regression models provided no additional insight into the CAAP scores or the change in CAAP scores of the Vassar students. *Because these changes in the CAAP scores for Vassar were small, we concluded that they should not be the focus of primary attention in the Assessment Committee's work, particularly as they have not been identified as associated with any systematic differences between students of different demographic or academic achievement groups.*

## DIT-2

The 2013 Assessment Committee was of the opinion that the DIT-2 test instrument included more nuanced, in-depth questions than did CAAP. The results for the DIT-2 scores were similar in some ways to what we found when we analyzed the CAAP scores, but different importantly in several other manners. There was positive net change in Vassar students' average DIT-2 scores from entering freshman to end of senior year. Further, these gains were a larger in the DIT than found in the CAAP (about 6.5%). This degree of gain was sufficient to be a modestly encouraging finding from the Wabash Study. However, like CAAP, socio-economic status (SES), academic measures (SAT scores, senior GPA, academic division of major), and other descriptive characteristics were found not to be significantly correlated with any DIT-2 outcomes that we studied. *Thus, both the CAAP and the DIT-2 results for Vassar in the Wabash Project found that each of the many groups of students we studied saw improvements on their scores from freshmen to senior year, distinctly more for DIT-2 than for CAAP, and with statistically equal measured gains. That is, no group(s) of students were found to have gained statistically more, or less, than those in the various other groups. While overall average gains were small, the equity in gains across many student characteristics is an encouraging finding for Vassar.*

## AMI

We also examined the "Academic Motivation index" (AMI), an ad-hoc WNS measure formed as a composite of eight individual behaviors and attitudes related to academic work (e.g. working for grades vs. interest in learning, frequency of coming to class prepared or not, reading more than just what is assigned or not, enjoying working on hard problems, etc.). Vassar's average AMI dropped from freshman orientation week (which we interpret as measuring behaviors and attitudes in high school, since students had not yet taken any Vassar courses) to the end of senior year. About 70 percent of the WNS participants showed a decline in their composite AMI scores; 25 percent showed a gain, and 5 percent showed no change. These results were cause for some concern to the Assessment Committee, and on campus generally to those reviewing the WNS findings. *Admittedly, a decline in AMI scores from freshman to senior year is not unique to Vassar; it is universal across the colleges that participated in the WNS. However, Vassar's average AMI score declined more than the average for the WNS college group as a whole, as well as for each of two individual colleges with whom Vassar mutually exchanged WNS Summary Report data.* Without full access to data for all colleges in the

Wabash Study, and without a great deal of analysis, it is not possible to study what factors might be correlated with Vassar's greater decline.

As was the case with the CAAP score changes, there was found to be an inverse relationship between the magnitude of the decline and the initial AMI level at entering freshman year (higher freshmen AMI scores declined, on average, more than lower ones). Again with AMI, there were no statistically significant correlations found between change in AMI score and demographic variables (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, foreign citizenship) socio-economic backgrounds (e.g., having an Vassar scholarship or not, parental education levels, or family income), nor with most academic variables. There did, however, appear to be a greater than average decline among those who had majored in the arts/humanities divisions of the Vassar curriculum than found for students having majored in other academic divisions. Furthermore, the decline in AMI scores was greater the more hours students reported spending on extra-curricular (co-curricular) activities and in relaxing and socializing with peers. In contrast, the decline in AMI scores was attenuated the more hours per week students spent preparing for class, and the greater the frequency of students giving a class presentation, discussing ideas from classwork with instructors outside of class, and receiving prompt feedback on academic work.

## GP

We also examined the findings on "Good Practice Measures," a set of student perceptions of 24 behaviors and attitudes that have been found in other research to be correlated with student learning. *Vassar's senior year GP scores were almost all lower than the GP scores found on average among all schools participating in the Wabash Project, and most were also lower than those found at each of the peer colleges whose data we could examine individually.* For example, 76% of Connecticut College seniors reported a "high level" of "faculty interest in teaching and student development," while only 66% of Vassar seniors did. 44% of Hamilton College seniors reported a "high level" of "receiving prompt feedback on academic work," while only 24% of Vassar seniors did. 69% of Carelton College seniors reported a high "quality of non-classroom interactions with faculty," while only 51% of Vassar seniors did. 51% of Hamilton seniors reported a high level of "challenging classes and high faculty expectations," while only 43% of Vassar seniors did. Again, without individual student data at these schools (to which we do not have access), and much analysis, it is not possible to cite factors that appear to relate to Vassar's systematically lower GP scores.

## Conclusions

We think that our finding of no correlation between our student respondents' demographic or academic characteristics (measured by SAT/ACT scores, GPA at end of senior year, and in most cases, division of academic major) and their responses to the CAAP, DIT or AMI is in itself an important finding. However, there is not a complete consensus on the accuracy of any metrics for assessing student outcomes that we have seen so far. For example, the 2013 Assessment Committee reported that it was impressed with the "nuanced, in-depth questions" of the DIT-2. However, some faculty had a much less positive view of the DIT-2. We also noted above that the CAAP scores of Vassar

students do not seem to change significantly between freshman and senior year. However, some of us wondered whether it would reveal anything interesting even if they had. Would a student whose CAAP scores substantially improved be likely to become a better attorney, physician, entrepreneur, government official, teacher, or informed voter? And if that were true, how would we establish it?

Many of us found more troubling the decline in Vassar students' AMI scores, and their low senior-year GP scores in comparison with other WNS schools. Nonetheless, we remain unsure how to interpret these facts. Regarding the AMI scores, we note that our data compares only student attitudes at two points: during freshman orientation and as seniors. While this may reflect a gradual demotivational process over their four years at Vassar, it may also simply reflect a sudden change in attitudes that occurred after freshman orientation. In other words, the "Freshman Year Hypothesis" is that the drop in AMI scores may be due largely to differences between students' expectations of college-level work (as reported during orientation week, and so based only on their secondary school experience) and their more challenging experiences of actual college work. As we noted above, we did not succeed in collected data from students at the end of their freshman year; however, data from peer institutions that did successfully collect such data supports the "Freshman Year Hypothesis." Carelton, Hamilton, and the University of Connecticut all report a drop from the "pre-freshman" to senior year AMI scores. However, for Hamilton, almost all of this drop occurs in the pre-freshman to end-of-freshman-year interval. For Carelton, there is actually an *improvement* in AMI scores between the end of the freshman year and the end of the senior year, even though the scores never return to their pre-freshman level. For the University of Connecticut, the drop occurs almost wholly in the pre-freshman to end-of-freshman-year interval, with the AMI scores remaining largely constant between the end of freshman year and the end of senior year.

Vassar student perceptions as seniors of the quality of various aspects of their educational experience, as reported on the GP measures, are perhaps most troubling and most difficult to account for. While the reported student perceptions do not match our own experience of Vassar as engaged teaching faculty, and while we have legitimate concerns about the ambiguity of some of the questions asked, we cannot completely discount Vassar's lower scores in this area in comparison with other WNS schools. This is a topic on which Vassar should reflect as an institution.

#### Future Projects

In the future, we hope to examine correlations between student responses to the AMI and GP questions and several other measures of intellectual achievement and/or maturity as scholars. For instance, we think it would be useful to look at correlations between AMI scores and whether students are elected to Phi Beta Kappa or not and also to look at whether students received departmental honors in their major. We also thought it would be useful to look at those who double majored and to single out those who had experienced some independent work with a faculty member, whether in a summer program such as the URSI or Ford programs or in connection with a senior thesis or science experiment. If possible we would also like to look at AMI outcomes by

individual major field as well as by curricular division. Such data are available at Vassar and can be merged with the Wabash data. In addition, we hope we can increase the understanding of our students' seeming decline from freshman to senior year in the "Good Practices" scores, possibly by looking for correlations (or lack of them) between the responses to the "Good Practices" questions and measures of learning outcomes. This analysis could throw some light on the validity of the "Good Practices" questions, which seemed to us to contain a good deal of hard-to-interpret subjective information.

A recent development in the general area of assessing the success of teaching is that Vassar has been invited (and has agreed) to participate in Phase II of the College Education Quality (CEQ) project that is being directed by Corbin Campbell of Teachers College of Columbia University. The aim of the CEQ is to "create alternative, innovative, and comprehensive measures of educational quality across institutions that could contribute to public understanding of college and university quality."<sup>2</sup> Phase II of this project aims to develop a benchmark for results across multiple institutions. Individual faculty participation in Phase II will be completely voluntary, and will involve having a researcher visit one of their classes and review their syllabus, as well as allowing the researcher to administer a five-minute survey to students in the class. All results will be confidential; neither administrators nor faculty will know results for individual classes. However, institutions will have access to their own aggregate results. The CEQ study is intriguing, and we look forward to seeing how future Assessment Committees evaluate it.

### **Part III: Assessment of Student Quantitative Skills**

Vassar has a Quantitative (QA) Requirement, which students must satisfy prior to graduation. We see this requirement as part of our effort to meet the College Mission Statement goal of promoting "analytical, informed, and independent thinking and sound judgment." The Quantitative Requirement was the focus of investigation of the 2012 Assessment Committee, and their examination raised substantial concerns.

Vassar administered the Consortium on Financing Higher Education (COFHE) Senior Survey to the senior class of 2010 (sample size 450). (COFHE is a group of 21 peer colleges.) This survey includes self-reported outcomes in quantitative areas, such as Using Quantitative Tools, Understanding Scientific Method, and Evaluating the Role of Science and Technology. Our review of the COFHE data was sobering and suggested a state of crisis: our students at large came in dead last among 22 peer institutions in their rating of the importance of using quantitative tools, and nearly last in the importance of understanding the scientific method and evaluating the role of science and technology. At the same time, in their self-assessment of their learning gains in those three areas, the number of students who said they are "much stronger now" was last or nearly last among 39 highly selective colleges and universities, while the number of students who said they had "no change" or are "worse now" came in first or nearly first.

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<sup>2</sup> Corbin M. Campbell, "College Education Quality (CEQ) Webinar for HEDS Institutions," PowerPoint presentation, 9 January 2014, Slide 3.

Vassar's math and science majors fared only slightly better relative to their peers at other institutions than our student body at large. In fact they rated particularly poorly in their ratings of the importance of and ability to use quantitative tools. Although the COFHE survey is not a direct measure of learning outcomes, it is quite clear that our QA requirement is having little positive effect on how our students feel about whether quantitative and scientific methods matter.

We recognized that a first step in assessing the effect of the QA requirement on student outcomes was determining what the goal of the requirement is. Having canvassed all of the QA courses on record and looked at their descriptions in the Course Catalog, the 2012 Assessment Committee found that almost none of them referred to the quantitative aspects of their courses at all. The Committee scoured the college website and the faculty handbook but found that there was no particular discussion of the requirement except on the Dean of Freshman web page and an almost identical statement in the requirements for graduation section of the Course Catalog:

Facility in quantitative reasoning is an important component of liberal education. Quantitative reasoning includes the ability to understand and evaluate arguments framed in quantitative or numerical terms, to analyze subject matter using quantitative techniques, to construct and evaluate quantitative arguments of one's own, and to make reasoned judgments about the kinds of questions that can be effectively addressed through quantitative methods.

(<http://deanoffreshmen.vassar.edu/academic/requirements.html>)<sup>3</sup>

The 2012 Assessment Committee argued that this "definition of 'quantitative' ... is left so broad as to be completely un-assessable on a college-wide level," and concluded that we at Vassar currently "have no agreed-upon goals for Vassar's QA skills or knowledge." The vagueness of the goals of the QA requirement may have led, in part, to the crisis the COFHE data suggests. Moreover, the Committee on Curricular Policies (CCP) is the primary administrative body responsible for certifying courses as meeting the QA requirement. The understanding of the current Assessment Committee is that the CCP approves courses for the QA using only the intuitive *sensus communis* of the committee, and has not engaged in a discussion of the nature and future of the QA requirement. We are not criticizing CCP for this: CCP has been left to make ad hoc decisions due to the absence of clear guidelines for the QA requirement. Consequently, our future goal is that Vassar develop guidelines for all QA instructors, with specific goals and outcomes. Once the goals and outcomes are in place, QA instructors can attend LTRC workshops to facilitate the transition to courses that are more targeted. In time, this should enable assessment of Vassar's QA requirement and initiatives.

One resource for a set of goals of QA courses is provided by the list of six core competencies for quantitative reasoning that are identified by the Mathematical

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. the almost identical language in the Course Catalogue:  
<http://catalogue.vassar.edu/academic-information/degrees-and-courses-of-study/requirements-for-the-degree-of-bachelor-of-arts/quantitative-courses.html>



Association of America (MAA): (a) read and understand quantitative information in graphs, tables, etc.; (b) interpret quantitative information and draw appropriate inferences; (c) solve problems using logic, math, and/or statistics; (d) estimate answers and check them for reasonableness; (e) communicate quantitative information verbally, graphically, and/or numerically; and (f) recognize the limitations of a mathematical or statistical model. While some faculty thought that the MAA core competencies might provide a useful framework for developing a more specific set of goals for the QA, other faculty thought that it would be better to require courses that stress “critical thinking” (more broadly construed), while still others thought that we should require something even more specific than the MAA list. For example, at least a rudimentary understanding of statistics would seem to be a prerequisite for anyone who is able to participate in “respectful debate and engaged citizenship” in the modern world. Could we mandate that all Vassar students take a course in elementary statistics, including a discussion of experimental design?

While there is not yet a consensus on what the QA requirement should be, there *is* a consensus that the Vassar community needs to engage in a dialogue that results in a sufficiently clear and workable definition of the goals of the QA requirements. Once we have decided what the QA requirement is intended to achieve, we should mandate specific criteria for a course to be listed as satisfying this requirement. For example, one might specify that QA courses meet the following criteria: (1) they must target at least a majority of whatever competencies the QA requirement is intended to develop; (2) at least half of the course content must be material that teaches some of these competencies; (3) at least half of the work on which the students’ grades are based must relate to some of these competencies; (4) the course syllabus must clearly state what the quantitative learning goals are for the course.

#### **Part IV: Assessment of Student Writing**

Vassar’s Mission Statement explains that the College “encourages articulate expression.” As part of our effort to achieve this goal, Vassar requires all first-year students to complete a Freshman Writing Seminar. One of the achievements of the 2004-2005 Assessment Committee was the creation of specific criteria for the structure of the FWS:

- (1) Enrollment in each Freshman Writing Seminar is limited to seventeen students.
- (2) Course readings and materials will vary by discipline, but in all cases should act as springboards to writing and discussion.
- (3) Some classroom time should be devoted to explicit discussion of the elements of writing, such as developing theses, incorporating evidence, and creating strong introductions, summaries, descriptions, paraphrases, etc. (The elements of a paper will vary across disciplines, and can/should play to the strengths of the professor and idiosyncratic parameters of each course.)
- (4) Each course should in some way require use of the library or consultation with

a librarian for the purposes of seeking out and evaluating relevant materials beyond the assigned class texts.

(5) Instructors are responsible for educating students on disciplinary forms of citation and attribution, and acquainting them with the publication *Originality and Attribution: A Guide for Student Writers at Vassar College*, available at the Dean of Studies Office.

(6) Assignments should occur frequently and vary in length and format, enabling instructors to assess students' strengths on a regular basis. Students in a Freshman Writing Seminar should expect to submit 25 to 30 pages of writing over the course of the semester.

(7) Instructors are strongly encouraged to incorporate revision into their assignments, and should require students to revise at least one paper, with close attention to making significant, not superficial, adjustments.

(8) Instructors should require one individual conference per student per semester, and should strongly encourage at least one more conference per student per semester. Instructors may decide to replace one or even two class meeting times with individual conference times. If a student misses a required conference, s/he should be marked absent and his/her grade should change accordingly.

(9) All FWS instructors are required to attend two annual meetings, one in the spring and one in the fall, convened by the Freshman Writing Seminar Steering Committee.

Although we find the content of these criteria admirable, one potential problem we note is that not all instructors are aware that these criteria exist. It is important that all instructors of FWS be made cognizant of these criteria. This is especially crucial since some faculty end up teaching FWS "at the last minute" as a result of staffing negotiations between individual departments and the administration. Perhaps even more significantly: there is currently no mechanism for determining whether instructors are following these criteria. Technically speaking, a department can assign the label "Freshman Writing Seminar" to any 100-level course, regardless of its content, so long as the course is offered in the fall semester and has a 17 student enrollment cap. We hasten to add that there is no evidence that faculty are abusing the FWS label. However, anecdotal reports from students suggest that there is wide variation in how much and what kinds of writing students do in the various FWS courses. It is difficult to assess how well we are meeting our writing requirement when there are actually no substantive content or evaluation *requirements, per se*. We would not wish to infringe on the independence of our instructors, but we wonder whether some review of syllabi (perhaps by the Committee on Curricular Policy) to ensure the appropriateness of FWS content and requirements would be appropriate.

A project recently undertaken has some promise of developing a more consistent experience of first-year writing at Vassar (with similar amounts of reading and writing,

similar types of assignments, similar work loads for faculty and students). In the spring of 2014, the Committee on Curricular Policies recommended, and the Faculty approved, an experiment in which 4-5 courses will be taught in the fall semester of 2014 with the following special features.

- Faculty volunteering to teach one of these experimental FWS would be agreeing to divorce their class substantially, though not totally, from disciplinary content. (This helps to address the concern many FWS instructors have expressed in the past that it is difficult to simultaneously teach writing and provide an adequate introduction to their own discipline.) Consequently, while each course will certainly have a unique theme, and will benefit from the disciplinary knowledge of the instructor, the class will be primarily concerned with modeling reading and writing as modes of discovery rather than the accumulation of content knowledge, and writing as a process of thinking rather than as a terminal product.
- Each of these semester-long courses would be divided into two parts:
  - Academic Discourse: The first nine weeks of this class will be dedicated to teaching students close reading techniques, the art of critical summary, and the fundamental rhetorical moves of entering into an academic conversation. Faculty might assign a single primary work from their discipline, and one or two critical analyses of that work which they use to model clear and cogent writing. Students in the first nine weeks will learn to form a critical perspective by reading analytically. They will learn to identify the basic elements of argumentation (claims, evidence, assumptions, language/tone, reasonableness, fallacies) with careful consideration of purpose, audience, genre; responding to texts (including media texts); structure and content; acknowledging sources; language. They will also practice finding and using sources in appropriate ways. All of this can be accomplished by deconstructing the one or two sample critical papers as assigned reading.
  - Mentored Project: During the final four weeks, students will undertake a mentored project that is relevant to the discipline. This might be individual research in History or small group experimentation in Biology. It might be a creative project in English or an empirical analysis in Sociology. The idea here is that students are given a certain amount of freedom to develop the ability to manage their time, seek out resources (such as their professor in office hours, research librarians, writing center consultants, etc) and manage a sustained project. This portion of the class will run as a workshop in which the professor does not provide the weekly content, but rather the students discuss their research and writing challenges and rewards, read one another's work, share strategies, etc., offering students both the structure and flexibility to engage with a wider range of resources and to develop a deeper sense of responsibility.
- Enrollment for these experimental courses will be capped at 14 students, and the faculty involved will be expected to meet once per month to reflect upon their experiences of the course.

Although assessment was not an explicit part of the proposal for this project, the

Assessment Committee encourages the College to make some effort to determine whether students in the experimental courses had a greater improvement in writing skills than other FWS students.

Our efforts to assess the teaching of writing at Vassar have not yet yielded definitive results. In 2008-2009, the Assessment Committee asked each department to produce a statement of what constitutes good writing in that discipline. The 2009-2010 Assessment Committee explored the feasibility of an intensive, longitudinal study of writing instruction and outcomes at Vassar. They (1) examined various longitudinal writing studies from other institutions and outlined a longitudinal writing study for Vassar, (2) wrote an application to the Institutional Review Board for preliminary collection of writing samples, (3) set up a Moodle site for the collection of writing samples, (4) received approval from the IRB, (5) contacted a random sample of 185 students, and (6) submitted an application to the Council of Writing Program Administrators to fund the preliminary stages of this study. Unfortunately, they received a very low return of student writing samples. That year's Committee believed that if the proposed study could begin before the first-year Orientation, with strong, continuous support from senior administration and active participation of all freshman writing instructors, as well as incentives for student participation, then there would be more optimal student participation.

The 2010-2011 Assessment Committee worked with the director of the Writing Center on refining the proposed longitudinal writing study, with a particular emphasis on determining when or why our students writing skills improve. To that end, the Committee examined rubrics developed by other institutions and also used the 2010-2011 Assessment Retreat to involve faculty across the curriculum in an exercise to identify core principles of good writing. One stumbling block for the proposed study has been funding. A previous attempt to fund the study using external sources brought feedback that the relevant funding agencies were more interested in funding studies using already-collected data than studies to collect new data. The Committee then consulted the Dean of the Faculty about possible internal funding for the proposed writing study, and provided a budget to the Dean in March of 2011. Although we all agree that improving student writing is a core concern of the College, there currently appears to be some disagreement among faculty and administrators over whether the investment of faculty resources and College funds required for the proposed writing study will be justified. In particular, there was concern that the proposed study would essentially duplicate the research that had been undertaken at Middlebury College and published in "Assessing Student Progression in Writing in the Disciplines (WID)." The Middlebury study had a methodology very similar to the one proposed for the Vassar study. Of course, no two colleges are the same, and Middlebury differs from Vassar in some of its writing-related courses and requirements. However, Middlebury is clearly a peer institution of ours and, like Vassar, it has a freshman writing seminar requirement. Their study of improvement in student writing concluded that, "...while the patterns of progression through the second and third years appear to be haphazard, students do grow as writers, generally in the First-Year Seminars, to some extent disciplinarily in their 'College Writing' courses,

and in both general and disciplinary ways when they engage senior independent work.”<sup>4</sup> The consensus was that these results are likely to be applicable to Vassar, thereby obviating the need for what would essentially be a duplication of this research at our own institution. However, we may wish to consider revisiting the possibility of a longitudinal writing study in the future.

### **Part V: Assessment of Student Foreign Language Proficiency**

A third graduation requirement of Vassar students is the following:

All three- and four-year students whose first language is English are required before graduation to demonstrate proficiency in a foreign language by one of the following six ways:

- one year of foreign-language study at Vassar at the introductory level or one semester at the intermediate level or above;
- the passing of a proficiency examination administered by one of the foreign language departments, the self-instructional language program or, for languages not in the Vassar curriculum, by the Office of the Dean of Studies;
- Advanced Placement score of 4 or 5 in a foreign language;
- SAT II achievement test score in a foreign language of at least 600;
- equivalent foreign-language coursework completed at another institution; such courses may involve languages not taught at Vassar, including American Sign Language; or
- completion of Old English and Beowulf (English 235 and 236); both Old English and Beowulf must be completed to satisfy the requirement.
- International students whose first language is not English must show formal academic study of their home language to fulfill this requirement. For information about the exemption process consult the Office of the Dean of Studies.<sup>5</sup>

Although the preceding is impressively detailed in its account of *how* to satisfy the requirement, we are not sure there has been a thoughtful recent discussion at Vassar of *what* the goal of the Foreign Language Requirement is, or what standard students are being challenged to meet. We hasten to add that we are in no way questioning the importance of foreign language study, or of the fact that it should be a Vassar

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<sup>4</sup> Kathleen Skubikowski and Adela Langrock, “Assessing Student Progression in Writing in the Disciplines (WID) at Middlebury College,” 15 September 2012 ([http://www.teaglefoundation.org/teagle/media/library/documents/white-papers/Teagle-Midd-whitepaper-final\\_1.pdf?ext=.pdf](http://www.teaglefoundation.org/teagle/media/library/documents/white-papers/Teagle-Midd-whitepaper-final_1.pdf?ext=.pdf)), p. 3 (accessed 3 February 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Vassar College 2013/14 Catalogue (<http://catalogue.vassar.edu/academic-information/degrees-and-courses-of-study/requirements-for-the-degree-of-bachelor-of-arts/foreign-language-proficiency.html>), accessed 3 February 2014.

requirement. Our concern is simply that we may need to have a discussion about what satisfying the Foreign Language Requirement is intended to demonstrate.

Our suggestion is in line with the report of the Foreign Language (FL) Subcommittee (2006-2007) of the Committee on Curricular Policies (CCP), which recommended that Vassar “better articulate the goals of the FL requirement in keeping with the values of a liberal arts college.” A faculty survey at that time indicated that a majority of the respondents agreed that the following values make a “moderate” or a “large” contribution to the value of language learning:

- liberalizing one’s experience (helping expand one’s view of the world);
- fostering critical reflection on the relation of language and culture, language and thought;
- contributing to cultural awareness or literacy;
- developing the intellect (including learning how to learn);
- exposing the learner to modes of thought outside the native language;
- teaching and encouraging respect for other peoples;
- encouraging communication, and developing an understanding for the complexity of communication.

The Subcommittee recommended that these (or comparable) liberal arts goals be made explicit through the College Catalogue, so that they would serve as common goals for all FL instructors, provide to students a more substantial rationale for the FL requirement, and be useful benchmarks for assessment.

The same survey also reported that 56% of Vassar faculty regarded the current FL requirement as “sufficient,” while 44% regarded it as insufficient. In addition, “between 2002 and 2006, of the students who met the FL requirement with a Vassar course, 55% took 3 or more foreign language units,” and “a striking 22% took more than 5 units.” On this basis, the FL Subcommittee recommended retaining the current requirement. However, the Subcommittee added, “given the surprisingly large percentage of faculty who feel that the current requirement is insufficient, the Subcommittee recommends that [the] issue of the length of the FL requirement be reconsidered in five years.” It has been more than five years, so the current Assessment Committee recommends following up on the issue of whether our current FL requirements are adequate.

We encourage others to read the entire 2007 “Report to CCP of the Foreign Language Subcommittee” (which has been uploaded to the Assessment Committee website) and consider all of its recommendations. Here we shall only discuss one more recommendation of that report:

The Association of Departments of Foreign Languages (ADFL) recommends an “optimum class size” of 15 students, and a maximum FL class size of 20 students, particularly at the elementary and intermediate levels. In keeping with this guideline, Vassar should look toward hiring more faculty members in departments in which language class sizes are ballooning.

The current Assessment Committee made an effort to determine the extent to which Vassar met these guidelines. However, as we have often found in this report, the data are

difficult to interpret. Over the last five years, if we consider only introductory (100-level) courses in languages that are regularly offered at Vassar, the *enrollment limit* averages 22 per section, which seems slightly high. (This is only for courses that have an enrollment limit, though. Some courses do not.) Nonetheless, the average *actual enrollment* for all such courses (including those without any enrollment limit) is 16 students per section, which seems reasonable. This number is potentially misleading, though, because it masks the fact that some sections have very high enrollments, which considerably exceed the optimum class size of 15, while other sections have quite small enrollments. For example, in the fall of 2013, Japanese 105-01 had an actual enrollment of 21 students (1 over the enrollment limit), while the only 100-level section in another language department had an enrollment of 7.

### Summary

(1) Recently implemented structural changes seem likely to make the Assessment Committee a more efficient and effective component of Vassar's assessment apparatus in the future, particularly in ensuring continuity and follow-up from year to year. (2) Our intensive examination of the WNS data yielded results that are of varying value and are subject to interpretation. However, some aspects of this data (particularly the student perceptions of faculty "Good Practices") should encourage greater self-scrutiny of our educational practices. (3), (4), and (5) Perhaps most striking, several incarnations of the Assessment Committee seem to have demonstrated that Vassar has yet to succeed in both clearly articulating, and demonstrating course compliance with, standards for student success in its writing, quantitative, and foreign language requirements. In short, we cannot assess whether we are succeeding in meeting our educational goals, unless we are clear ourselves about what these goals *are*.

Respectfully submitted,

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